

**Phoenix** - U.S. Rep Harry Mitchell today addressed the 110<sup>th</sup> Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) National Convention in Phoenix, Arizona. Mitchell serves on the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and is Chairman of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee. Below are his remarks as prepared for delivery:

Thank you Commander Gardner.

I am honored and privileged to be with you today at this 110th National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

On behalf of myself and the state of Arizona - with a special genuflection on behalf of our local economy - I want to give the VFW, the members of the Ladies Auxiliary and all your family members a warm welcome to the Valley of the Sun. Although in August, "warm" may not be the right word for it.

I would first like to welcome Secretary Eric Shinseki to my home state of Arizona and thank him for his leadership on behalf of our nation's veterans.

I first would like to humbly thank each of the VFW members here today - and your 1.6 million members nationwide -- for your brave and noble service to our nation. It's an inspiring sight to look out and see so many of you here. Your answer to the call of duty, your role in our nation's great history, your sacrifices and those of your lost comrades, must never be forgotten.

And to the thousands of American armed forces members who are right now serving in harm's way across the globe: We are grateful and proud of what you are doing, and our thoughts and prayers are with you.

I also want to thank all of the family members and loved ones of veterans and service members who are here today. As a parent and a grandfather, I know that there are no makeup days when it comes to missed birthdays, holidays, anniversaries and graduations. You have all

made untold sacrifices. You are unsung heroes, and you deserve our nation's deep gratitude as well.

I know there are a lot of folks here from around the country, and there are many of you here from Arizona, too. There are a few members of the VFW Department of Arizona that I would like to acknowledge.

Commander Vincent Reagan of Casa Grande

Adjutant Raymond Thomas of Scottsdale

And Quartermaster Leonard Kuczynski of Scottsdale.

Leonard and Raymond both live in my Congressional District. I know that all three of you must be very pleased and proud with how this outstanding conference has come together. Congratulations.

As some of you may know, I serve on the House Veterans Affairs Committee. I also chair the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. This service continues to be the most rewarding part of my service in Congress. With the help of the dedicated Veterans Service Organizations like the VFW, I have had the opportunity to work for those who fought and served bravely for our country. It's a job I take very seriously.

While some things may divide us as a nation, we must be united in keeping our promise to every soldier, sailor, airman and marine that we put in harm's way that they will be cared for when they return. Supporting our troops is not a slogan. It's a mandate and a moral imperative.

One key aspect of that mandate is making sure the Department of Veterans Affairs has the resources it needs year over year to provide the care veterans like yourselves need. Just last month we scored a major victory on that front.

The 2010 Military Construction Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill, which passed with overwhelming bi-partisan support, contained an important change that I had been asking for. Instead of providing funding for just one year, the bill also included nearly \$50 billion for the VA in 2011 for medical services, medical support and compliance and medical facilities. Like you, I believe congressional budget delays should not hamstring the delivery of healthcare to veterans. And the upwards of 50 billion dollars for advanced funding is a much needed step in the right direction.

I know that the issue of advanced funding is a priority of the VFW, and I thank you for your support on this. Veterans' health care should NEVER be compromised by delays in the congressional budget cycle. This advanced funding will ensure that delivery of care is both reliable and timely.

I've discovered since I came to Congress that our most important responsibility - besides crafting and voting on policy - is oversight.

As Chairman of Oversight and Investigation, our committee has held over two dozen hearing that have shed light on problems in the VA system and led to numerous reforms.

Among the most pressing issues we have seen is the epidemic of suicides among returning veterans. At our urging, the VA has reversed a longstanding policy on using mass-media advertising to reach out to veterans who are at risk of taking their own lives. Now, to the VA's credit, Public Service Announcements starring the actor Gary Sinise, who portrayed a disabled Vietnam veteran in the movie Forrest Gump, have been aired across the nation. And ads for the VA's hotline - 1 800-273-TALK - have appeared on buses, including those here in the Valley.

Most recently, we gained the shocked attention of the nation when we looked into allegations that overworked VA employees in Detroit shredded or hid thousands of active patient records in an effort keep up with productivity demands and quotas.

We have also looked into botched prostate cancer treatments at a VA hospital in Philadelphia,

where nearly 100 patients received the incorrect doses of radiation.

And we held a hearing that exposed errors in endoscopic procedures at VA hospitals in Florida, Tennessee and Georgia that put more than 10,000 veterans at risk of infection and illnesses like Hepatitis and HIV.

Errors and failures like this are frustrating and unconscionable, but shedding light on them has led to reforms. There's an awful lot of work still to do, but my priority as Chairman of Oversight and Investigations is to make sure that situations like this do not happen again.

As I said, serving on the Veterans Committee has been a terrific experience. However, I do not come from a military background. My background is education. I spent 28 years in the classroom as a high school government and civics teacher in my hometown of Tempe. All during the time I was mayor of Tempe, I would teach my classes during the first half of the day and then head down to City Hall.

Because of my background and belief in the life-changing power of education, there is one bill I have been involved with in Congress that is easily the most rewarding issue I have ever worked on. Just over a year ago, I had the honor of teaming with Senator Jim Webb of Virginia to introduce and pass a new and much-improved G.I. Bill.

We promised our service members the opportunity for higher education when they joined, and I believe it is our responsibility to see that they get it when they become veterans.

The old Montgomery GI Bill has done many good things for our veterans. But over the years it has become a peacetime benefit that does not cover all the costs of a higher education the way the original GI Bill did after World War II. As you know all too well, we are not at peace.

The response to the bill among veterans has been phenomenal. After a year of implementation and preparation, tens of thousands of veterans have this month started to use the new GI Bill to further their education. This proven mixture of military experience and discipline coupled with higher education and training will exponentially improve their economic prospects and

strengthen our work force.

This new GI Bill extends educational benefits to members of the military who have served on active duty since Sept. 11, 2001. This includes career service members, who can now transfer some or all of their benefit to their spouses and children.

Returning veterans who qualify will have the full cost of the education paid for, as well as their housing and educational materials. They will have 15 years to use it, and the benefit is transferable to their children or a spouse.

One of the most important components of this new GI Bill is that, for the first time, the benefit is available to activated Guard and Reservists. For years Guard and Reservists took the same risks and made the same sacrifices in overseas combat zones, but weren't eligible for the same benefits when they got home. That is no longer the case.

It is my hope and firm expectation that this new GI Bill will provide veterans with a greater chance of success while transitioning back into civilian life.

After World War II, the G.I. Bill helped to train what became known as the Greatest Generation. By show of hands, how many of you here today served during the Second World War?

The best thing that we can do today to honor that service - and to ensure our ongoing strength as a nation - is to make sure this next generation of brave citizen soldiers has that same opportunity for success.

With that, I want to once again thank all of you for your service and for giving me this opportunity to express my gratitude to the VFW for its tireless advocacy on behalf of veterans' issues. We must always remember the words of our first president, George Washington. "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation."

Thank you very much and enjoy the rest of the conference.